

Recording Decorative Artwork at the Aquatic Park Bathhouse, San Francisco Maritime NHP

*T*ime magazine described San Francisco's Aquatic Park as "one of the most sophisticated WPA building jobs in the U.S."* One of California's largest construction projects commissioned by the Works Progress Administration, the bathhouse is the most notable structure in the complex and exemplifies the streamlined Moderne style of architecture. Strong nautical elements in the design were inspired by such luxury liners as *Normandie* and *Nieuw Amsterdam*, and several distinguished artists were responsible for the adornment of the exterior and interior. While the artwork of the Aquatic Park Complex is notable for its quality, it is also significant for its surreal and abstract forms not commonly found in WPA projects.

The work of one artist, Sargent Johnson, is represented in the entrance and back porch of



the bathhouse. Johnson was a nationally recognized sculptor and one of only two black artists in California to participate in the WPA program. Under the direction of Hilaire Hiler, an internationally recognized muralist, Johnson depicted abstract and stylized forms of sea life and nautical references by incising lines into green slate panels that surround the main entrance into the building. The design for the back porch continues with the use of maritime

motifs rendered in multi-colored tile mosaics. Begun in 1936, by mid-1938 work on the murals and tile mosaics still was not complete. Provisions for the artists to work beyond the official termination date of January 22, 1939, were never implemented due to difficulties that arose with the concessionaire. Hiler was not permitted back on the premises to complete his murals and Johnson, angered at what he considered a misuse of the public facilities, refused to complete the tile mosaics. The mosaics remain, to this day, unfinished. The public and critics were overwhelmingly impressed with the artists' work when the building was officially opened on January 22, 1939.

Reference

Historical background of Aquatic Park Bathhouse based on the *National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form*, Dec. 12, 1983.

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* *Time*, February 6, 1939, page 41.